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MOSES TRIPPED ON A ROCK AND COULDN'T MAKE IT TO THE PROMISED LAND

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In the following events described in the Hebrew Bible, we have before us a small part of Jewish moral history.[1] *It aims to teach the essentials of our relationship to God, the Creator and Mastermind of Creation, especially in regard to the spiritual and physical lawfulness of God's Creation.*[2] *It is a history populated by personages, events, and prototypes that need not have any scientifically verifiable historical existence.*

Before they had received the Torah, while camped at Rephidim,[3] the people quarreled with Moses, demanding water, and accusing him of bringing them out of Egypt to die of thirst, along with their children and livestock. God commanded Moses to strike a rock and bring forth water to reassure the people they would have enough water as they continued on their journey (even though they had not yet actually been without water[4]). Moses struck the rock and water flowed, allaying the doubts of the people as to God's miraculous and unfailing care for them.[5]

Afterwards, during their 40-year sojourn through the desert, the need for water was sustained by the "Well of Miriam." Although the well is not mentioned specifically, the Torah does say, "The Israelites came… and Miriam died there… and there was no water for the congregation."[6] The Sages teach that God provided the water based on the merit of Miriam.[7] Yet, as Rabbi Hirsch notes, "… henceforth for every refreshing drink they enjoyed in the wilderness, they had to thank, and were to thank, the rock on the Mountain of God where they received the Torah"[8] There was no lack of water until the death of Miriam in their fortieth year in Bamidbar. But there was to be a second incident at a rock, also at a place called Meribah like the first.

Moses Primed to Lose His Temper

The *parasha* (Torah reading) that comes just before that second incident is Korach, which suggests the possibility that Moses was primed to be triggered emotionally, because at that time many people were not humble before God. They would not fully accept God's omniscience and omnipotence. They were not yet prepared to subordinate their wills to the will of God, which had been revealed to them.

Moses was confronted by an uprising of 250 princes, led by Korach,[9] which must have been incredibly disheartening for him. When he heard the leaders declare that all the people were holy, and that Moses had arrogated too much to himself, he fell upon his face.[10]

Moses may have realized the gravity of their betrayal of their *brit* (covenant) with God, and so he immediately subordinated his own will and sought God's will in the matter. In effect, he left the final resolution of the matter up to God.[11] If, later, at the rock, Moses had similarly sought to effect God's will, then anything about which he had self-doubt, confused moral assessment, directional uncertainty, or emotional upset should have immediately prompted within him the question: What is God's preferred action (or the lack of it) here? But he didn't ask that.

Events at the Rock and the Consequences

When the people continued on into the desert of Zin at a much harsher place after 40 years journeying, they had no water. They began to complain to Moses, questioning why he had brought them to a place where they might die. The people taunted Moses to get him to bring water out of the rock at this second Meribah.[12] They were ambivalent about Moses—at times he had led them to freedom, to food, to physical salvation; at other times they blamed him for every misery they had experienced since leaving Egypt.

Then Moses and Aaron fell to the ground in the Tent of Meeting, as if seeking God's assurance of their

mission and how to deal with the contention of the people. At that point, they experienced the "glory of God" which appeared to them.[13] God told Moses, "Take the staff and gather the congregation together, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and you shall bring water for them out of the rock…."[14]

God would perform a miracle for the people through Moses his "messenger," to reaffirm that Moses was still God's appointed "servitor."[15] The prescribed manner of getting water from the rock, by Moses simply *speaking* to it, "…would have convinced the people of the deep wrong they had done in accusing Moses and Aaron of leading them to this waterless place against the will of God…."[16]

At the rock and afterwards, Moses called the people "rebels."[17] He didn't follow God's instructions. He didn't *speak* to the rock. Instead, "He instantly lost his temper and struck the rock twice" with the staff.[18] He abandoned his self-control, he squandered the teaching moment that would affirm the glory of God and his own role as God's messenger, and he publicly demonstrated an apparent loss of faith in God. He failed to rely on God, to overcome his earlier painful experience, to set aside his emotionally twisted thinking and self-centered desire to express his anger in the moment.[19]

He should have demonstrated his faith by Kiddush Hashem—sanctifying the Name of God—by relying on God's omniscience and omnipotence to bring about the people's faith and, thereby, continued trust in his leadership. The consequence of Moses having allowed his emotions to override God's instructions was that God told him he would not bring the congregation into the promised land.

Later, God told Moses to go up on the mountain that the people were to cross to enter the land,[20] to see what they had been given, but he would be buried[21] as Aaron was—on the way to the promised land, not in it—because he had failed to sanctify God in the sight of the people.[22] Finally, Moses beseeched God to allow him to "…see the good land on the other side of the Jordan…." But God becomes angry, responding: "You have said enough, speak no more to Me of this matter."[23]

It's important to note that God imposed the educational consequence of denying Moses entry into the land for the sake of the people.[24] It was essential that, with the future that lay before them, entering into a new land, they not go ahead with a faulty model of leadership. They should not start out with the memory of a leader who didn't have self-control, who didn't keep the well-being of the people uppermost in mind, and ultimately who didn't rely on God's word. Moreover, the consequence for Moses established God's righteousness. It demonstrated equal treatment under the law, regardless of status.

Standing Before God as a Prophet

As we have learned from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1805-1880), "The prophet stands before God."[25] In other words, according to the *mesorah* of Torah Judaism, the tradition of the Jewish people handed down from family to family for millennia, the words of the prophet do not come *from* within him or her, even those of a Moses, but are spoken by God *to* the prophet[26] —the particulars of which must be clarified to fully understand any given situation.

When Moses was confronted by Korach and the band of rebels, he was standing before God—that is, he immediately turned to a place of sanctuary and prostrated himself before God to learn what he would be directed to say and do. And there we see God's will carried out and Hashem sanctified. When Moses confronted the people at the rock, charged by God to speak to the rock, he was *not* standing before God—that is, he immediately turned within himself, and unleashed his own words of anger and resentment. Yet Hashem was also sanctified, but only because of the consequence Moses suffered.

Effects of Educational Consequences

What might we imagine were the effects of God's consequential education of Moses? After God told Moses with utter finality to go up on the promontory to look upon the land that he would never enter, Moses almost certainly would have been forced to look at himself and the circumstances that led to God's denial, eventually reconsidering his actions that produced the painful education he was experiencing.

Under the circumstances, Moses might well have had a change of heart, no longer yearning to go into the land, because the consequence of his behavior taught him the limitations of his own spirituality. When thinking of the consequence for his loss of self-control and failure of faith at the rock, he might well have concluded: there is no comparison between my shallow request of God that I be allowed to see the good land versus the importance of not appearing before the people as a leader with great responsibility losing self-control, expressing my anger with the people.

Moses might also have come to admit to himself that, any outcome other than God's denial of his entry into the land would have raised questions of whether God was acting righteously, letting Moses off the hook despite his failure to control his anger and that he did not rely on[27] God.[28]

Presumably, because he made no effort to retain the role he had fulfilled so well, Moses absorbed the lesson. When God showed him what his seed would acquire, what did Moses do? He blessed the people and commanded the Torah to them, which would afford them all the blessings and commandments they would require in his absence. He died at 120, physically still strong.

Moses knew his appointment as a servant of God was already fulfilled, and perhaps he needed nothing more to die in peace than the knowledge that, despite whatever offense he had given to God, he had executed the mission that had occupied his devotion, even with his failures and foibles. He had done his part to keep on track God's providential unfolding of the creation and Israel's part in it—all of which we can see was made possible by his humble self-regard in living up to the extraordinary role he had been assigned. For "the man Moses was very humble, more than any other men which were upon the face of the earth."[29]

Perhaps, because position, power, prestige and possessions held no allure for him, Moses only needed to see that the people would enter the land and strive to build a holy nation according to God's Law. That would be enough for Moses to be at peace within himself. We believe he received all the reward his humility required: that God's purpose would be realized. Moses was devoted exclusively to fulfilling God's will, which he would serve with all his being until the very end, presumably including acceptance of his own burial place.

Accountability and Responsibility of Leaders

Moses was not "punished" by keeping him from the Promised Land. But he was forced to acknowledge his responsibility as a prophetic leader and the limits of his own spiritual strength. He was but a man, a one-of-a-kind prophet but not a spiritual superman, and he was accountable.

We recognize here that a leader should not only consciously model desirable behavior but also always be aware that modeling works both intentionally and unintentionally. Losing one's temper as a leader, for example, unwittingly sets the stage for others to abandon their self-control. It's not just a bad look; it's bad modeling, with far-reaching consequences.

Moses had done what, for anyone with the responsibility for the well-being of the people, could not be allowed to go unaccountable and uncorrected. He had abandoned control of his anger, giving his emotions free rein, which is not acceptable for those who have been given the privilege and honor of taking responsibility for the well-being of the people. It was ironic that Moses, who had rebelled against God, called the people "rebels" (הַמֹּרִים)—hypocrisy the people would have come to identify.

[1] That the Torah is not meant to be a scientific text but to teach God's law and covenant with the Jewish people, morality and ethics, and the *moral history* of Israel is affirmed by many traditional sources. For examples, see: Pesachim 94b, Bereishit Rabbah 1:1, Rambam, Guide II:25 and II:30, and Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bereshit 1:1 and 1:14.

[2] The two *lawful* realms, physical and spiritual, are *not* independent of one another but an integrated, unitary system, such that the violation of God's spiritual law ordinary fails the intended purpose when it encounters God's lawfulness of the physical creation. In effect, immoral purposes affect the physical world, which reacts according to its own lawfulness. For example, that's what happens with lying, which is a violation of spiritual lawfulness. It's a lesson most of us learn in childhood: one lie inevitably leads to another lie, and another, and another, until the corrupt edifice of deceit crumbles when its effects eventually encounter the lawfulness of physical life and results in harm to ourselves and others, and we're caught in the blowback of our wrongdoing, sometimes immediately, sometimes long-delayed. And it's equally true that immoral behavior can stimulate and reinforce immoral intentions in others, because often we acquire behavior in cognitive form through observational learning before acting it out.

[3] Shemot 17:1-7

[4] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch commentary on Shemot 17:1

[5] It was following these events, while still in Rephidim, that Amalek (the grandson of Esav), came and attacked Israel for the first time (Shemot 17:8-14).

[6] Bamidbar 20:1–2

[7] Taanit 9a, Midrash Rabbah

[8] Hirsch commentary on Shemot 17:5-6

[9] Bamidbar 19:2

[10] Bamidbar 19:4

[11] Bamidbar 19:5

[12] Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 19:9

[13] וַיֵּרָא כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה אֲלֵיהֶם

[14] Bamidbar 20:6-8

[15] Hirsch commentary on Bamidbar 20:8

[16] Op. cit.

[17] הַמֹּרִים

[18] Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 19:9

[19] Regarding Moses' anger in striking the rock, see Hirsch commentary on Bamidbar 20:10-11.

[20] The mountain (הַר הָעֲבָרִים) mentioned in Bamidbar 27:14

[21] That is, "gathered to your people" (וְנֶאֱסַפְתָּ אֶל־עַמֶּיךָ)

[22] Bamidbar 27:12-14

[23] Devarim 3:25 (רַב־לָךְ אַל־תּוֹסֶף דַּבֵּר אֵלַי עוֹד בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה)

[24] Bamidbar 3:26

[25] Hirsch commentary on Shemot 7:1

[26] This is difficult to understand in modernity, especially while "standing on one foot." We have attempted to describe our own lengthy process of coming to understand the God of Torah Judaism in our article, "Tikkun Olam: Our Soul-Searching Repair of the World" [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/TIKKUN_OLAM_-SOUL_SEARCHING.pdf].

[27] That is, he did not have faith in God (לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם).

[28] Regarding the idea that Moses would have taken the educational consequences to heart, see the Hirsch commentary on Devarim 3:28.

[29] Bamidbar 12:3 (וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו [עָנְיו] מְאֹד מִכֹּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה)

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